

Fighting the enemy inside

Group raising funds to renovate Aurora recovery home for addicted veterans

By Paul LaTour
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Jeff Gilbert has no military experience, but he can empathize with veterans who struggle with drug and alcohol addiction.

Gilbert faced the same battle with addiction — a battle that led him to help others through Hope for Tomorrow, a nonprofit organization he co-founded with his wife, Janet, in 1999. About a decade later, while he was doing research for his doctorate in psychology, he learned about the connection between post-traumatic stress disorder and addiction in veterans.

That spurred Gilbert to create U.S. VETCare, a program specifically designed to help addicted veterans in recovery-home settings, similar to the four homes he had set up in Aurora for Hope for Tomorrow.

VETCare means so much to Gilbert that one morning earlier this spring he kept an appointment with a reporter to talk about the program while mourning the loss of his daughter, Lynlee Gilbert, a 17-year-old Batavia High School student who had been killed in a car crash the day before.

"They saved my life because they understand veterans need help."

— Dave, 23, on U.S. VETCare

"We're Americans and as citizens of this country we owe it to our vets," Gilbert, of Batavia, said that morning. "They are working to keep the fight over there so we can be safe here. The least we can do when they return home is welcome them with open arms and say, 'We're glad you're here, thank you.'"

In fall 2009 Hope for Tomorrow converted one of its existing homes on Aurora's west side into a residence for eight veterans. Another house north of downtown Aurora that is being renovated will hold 15 veterans. The renovations are being funded in part through a \$450,000 grant from the city of Aurora that also

funded the purchase of a nearby home that became the organization's corporate office.

The Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs also awarded a \$100,000 grant for the remodeling of the 15-bed house. Built in 1857, it had been run by the Gateway Foundation for decades as a recovery home known as Opportunity House.

Gilbert has a special bond with Op House: It's where he completed his recovery program in 1997. He returned in 1998 as a counselor, and now owns the house for VETCare.

Gilbert wants to have the remodeling done soon on Op House because demand is high and the eight-bed home on the west side isn't enough.

On a recent weekday afternoon three residents — Tim, Dave and Don — gathered in the kitchen of that original VETCare home in the Hercules Park neighborhood, a subdivision that includes Aurora University. The men asked to be referred to only by their first names because anonymity is a key component in recovery.



CHUCK BERMAN/TRIBUNE PHOTOS



Jeff Gilbert, co-founder of Hope for Tomorrow, visits the Aurora recovery home being renovated for military veterans as part of his organization's U.S. VETCare program. "We want to do whatever we can to help troops get back on their feet and get back into the game of life," Gilbert says.

CHICAGOLAND EXTRA

Homes help vets fight enemy within

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A newspaper clipping of Osama bin Laden's death hung on the refrigerator, the only hint of the men's military connection. They also share less fortunate bonds: their battles with drugs and alcohol, and having nowhere else to turn.

"From what I've seen, people don't care about veterans anymore," said Dave, 23, the youngest of the home's six current residents and an ex-Navy corpsman. "I was looking at being homeless. They saved my life because they understand veterans need help."

Residents get help in a variety of ways from VETCare. After an extensive evaluation process to be accepted into the program, residents are required to work and to complete daily household chores. They must attend five counseling meetings each week and are subject to alcohol and drug testing.

To ensure they don't disturb the neighbors, they are prohibited from loitering in front of the house. Those who smoke do so in the backyard or on the back deck. Loud music is not allowed.

The ones who succeed in the program find the structure and rules are designed to help them. They aren't seen as a burden.

"We ask to come here. We're not sentenced to come here," said Tim, 54, an ex-Marine who is the house manager. "We can leave anytime we want to."

VETCare's parent organization, Hope for Tomorrow, has a staff of four paid employees, including Gilbert, who estimates he works 80 to 85 hours per week. The organization's on-call medical director, William Gossman, volunteers his time.

Since VETCare began, it has served 24 men with an average age of 40, Gilbert said. The average stay is 187 days. Gilbert said 85 to 90 percent of residents report having the longest and best quality of sobriety in their lives while going through the program.

Still, not everybody succeeds. In the 17 months Tim has lived there he said around a dozen have relapsed. But he remembered only one who succumbed to the glaring temptation found just down the street—a bar.

"When I first moved in here I



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Dave, left, with Jeff Gilbert at the VETCare recovery home in Aurora's Hercules Park area. Dave compares the group to a family: "You don't get along all the time, but they're always there to help you when you need it."

looked down at that goofy bar and thought, "This doesn't seem like a very advantageous spot here," he said.

"But it's a good reminder that that's reality out there," said Don, 49, who has lived in the house for three months.

"It is," Tim said. "It's everywhere. You can't hide from it."

The men also can't hide from one another. Tim joked that six grown men aren't meant to live together in one house. But the men find spending all that time in close quarters creates a family atmosphere, complete with all the ups and downs that entails.

"You've got people you don't like and people you do like. It's the same with a family," Dave said.

"You don't get along all the time, but they're always there to help you when you need it."

Gilbert said the residents have become a welcome addition to the neighborhood.

When Gilbert spoke at a rezoning meeting for the second recovery home, a number of community members joined him in support. They included Janet Swanson, the captain of the Hercules Park Neighborhood Watch.

While some people objected to having a recovery home in their backyard, their concerns were soon assuaged, Swanson said.

"There has never been a problem (with the residents)," Swanson said. "They are always polite. The lawn is always maintained.

They have the right to be part of our neighborhood as much as anybody else."

Objections from neighbors weren't the problem for the house. Remodeling costs are.

Gilbert originally estimated that it would cost \$186,000 to renovate the house. He now says it will be closer to \$250,000. The VA grant was used toward that, but the organization is still left with a large remainder.

To help meet the difference, Hope for Tomorrow has some fundraisers planned this summer. The first is a charity golf outing and pig roast at Tamarack Golf Club in Naperville on July 14. On July 23, it is holding a U.S. Vet Ride, a 100-mile motorcycle ride.

Plans for a 5-kilometer run in downtown Aurora are also under way. Information on the fundraisers can be found at the agency's website, hopefortomorrow.net.

"We want to complete this project and not accumulate debt so we can provide services and not have to pay for overhead," Gilbert said.

Gilbert is driven toward realizing that goal and to get the house operational so veterans can begin moving in.

"We want to do whatever we can to help troops get back on their feet and get back into the game of life," he said. "The bottom line is lives are going to be changed here and hope is going to be restored."